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INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 003752

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/29/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)

SUBJECT: KARBALA: OFF THE SOFA, ON THE CAMPAIGN TRAIL

REF: A. BAGHDAD 3639  
[1](#)B. BAGHDAD 2812  
[1](#)C. BAGHDAD 3033  
[1](#)D. BAGHDAD 3655  
[1](#)E. BAGHDAD 3032

Classified By: Deputy Political Counselor John Fox for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

This is a PRT Karbala reporting cable.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: With the SOFA having been approved by the Council of Representatives (CoR), Provincial Council (PC) candidates in Karbala are poised to launch their campaigns. Few incumbents, including Da'wa-affiliated Governor Aqeel Mahmoud al-Khazali, are running directly under the aegis of established parties, preferring instead to join coalition and independent lists. Iranian Consulate officials and their local allies reportedly are trash-talking candidates they view as threats to Tehran's interests here, while the prospect of elections is having a salutary effect on a long-running tribal dispute near the border with Anbar Province. End Summary.

Off and Running  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) The CoR's approval of the SoFA cleared the last roadblock to the start of the provincial election campaign season in Karbala, according to local government officials. Officially, they report, campaigning may begin in earnest on Monday, December 1. However, a number of candidates have jumped the gun and begun meeting with constituents to rally support in the run-up to the balloting on January 31. An independent candidate told PRT officers that he planned to travel to Syria in early December to have posters and flyers designed and printed. He said the high prices charged for such services in Iraq make resorting to foreign suppliers a cost-effective alternative.

[1](#)3. (C) In a surprise to many observers here, Governor Aqeel Mahmoud al-Khazali has decided to seek reelection. It had been widely assumed that he would land a position in Baghdad with the assistance of his mentor, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (ref A). Although clearly identified in the public's mind with Maliki and the Da'wa Party, Aqeel nonetheless is running on a "coalition" list (he is number 13) comprised of numerous independents and smaller-party candidates. According to a contact at the PC, relatively few incumbents are choosing to declare themselves unequivocally as candidates representing Da'wa, ISCI or other major parties. He said that this is because Karbalans are disgusted by what they see as the parties having put politics ahead of progress, thus rendering the current PC unable to do accomplish anything substantial for the province or its people.

Minding the Neighbors  
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[1](#)4. (C) Iranian Consulate officials reportedly are active

also. A local business owner who is a tribal PC candidate recently told the PRT that he earned the Iranians' enmity by providing the Iraqi Police with information that led to the arrest on November 20 of Kareem al-Musawi, the primary agent for Shamsah Travel and Tourism, which we believe is the same as the Kosar Organization (ref B). According to the hotelier, Consul General Ridha Khoda Wardiyan, his staffers Nada Ali and Sayid Muqaddam (ref C), and local allies (including, allegedly, Acting PC Chairman Abd al-Al al-Yasiri; see ref D) are coupling the money they distribute around town with criticism of candidates they view as threats to Iranian interests here.

¶15. (C) Meanwhile, the approaching elections already are having a salutary effect on a long-simmering tribal dispute with sectarian dimensions. Karbala UNAMI representative and former provincial governor Shaykh Ali Kamonah related on November 23 that the Shi'a tribes in Ayn al-Tamr qadaa, in the northwest part of the province, have come to realize that Qthe northwest part of the province, have come to realize that they cannot continue to shun the Sunni tribes in neighboring al-Rahaliyah without strengthening the hand of anti-Shi'a candidates in Anbar Province (where al-Rahaliyah is located). Kamonah -- who has been meeting regularly with both sides at the Ahmad bin Hashim Shrine (ref E) -- said the Ayn al-Tamr tribes have reduced their blood-money demands to a reasonable amount, making a settlement early in 2009 increasingly likely.

Comment

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¶16. (C) Although far from a fever pitch, excitement here concerning the provincial elections is palpable and building.

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We expect politicking to increase in volume and intensity at the end of Eid al-Adha (circa December 12) and especially once Muharram -- marking the Islamic New Year -- begins on December 29. In the meantime, we will continue to monitor closely allegations of Iranian involvement in the process. Money talks, but Wardiyan and his associates may have a tough time overcoming what our contacts describe as widespread antipathy toward "Persian" high-handedness here. End

Comment.

CROCKER